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## Go Jump in a Lake!

Jay M. Price  
*Wichita State University*

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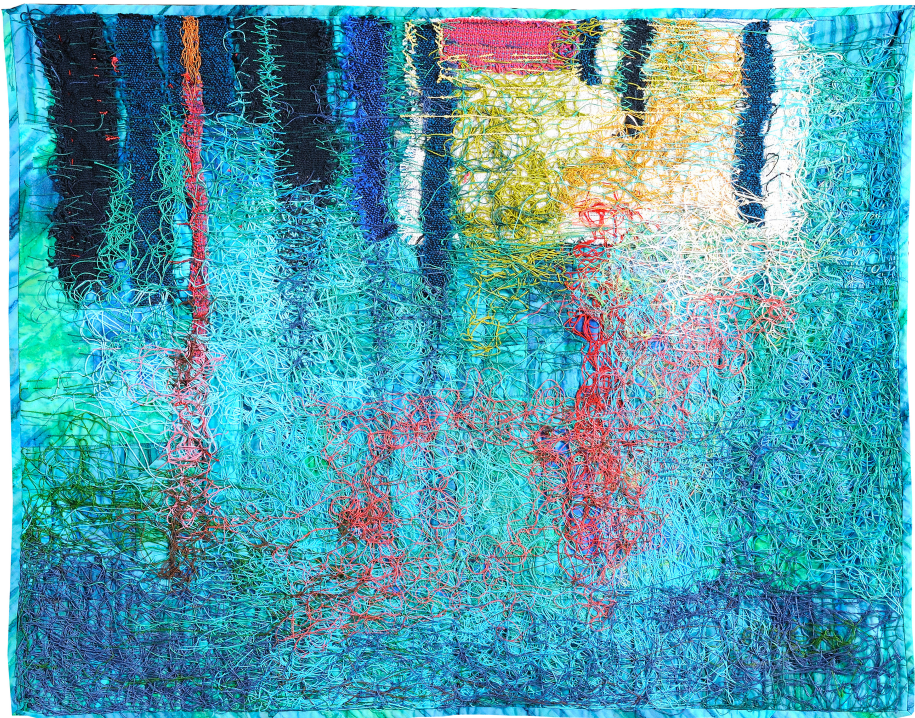
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*Lakescape*  
Shin-hee Chin

## GO JUMP IN A LAKE!

A few years ago I was part of a group who gathered at Toronto Lake to explore the nature trails at Cross Timbers State Park.

There was a birder whose attuned ears picked up on the faintest calls. There were plant experts who debated the genus and species of the stems and leaves we found on our walk. The entomologist in the group bounded up to rotten logs and, with gleeful abandon, stuck her hands in the wooded crevasses looking for beetles. As the historian, I came with maps, including a copy of a 1905 plat map of the area. It was striking how much this place had changed. The nature trail paralleled what had once been a railroad line that skirted the bluff and then sloped down into the valley, under what is now the waters of a lake. It was a reminder that this body of water was not an old, ancient part of the landscape. In fact, it was a newcomer to the area.

It is easy for Kansans to take lakes and reservoirs for granted, forgetting that they are 1) manmade and 2) relatively recent creations. In the early 1900s, Kansans who did not live along the Kansas or Missouri Rivers, had limited opportunities to enjoy bodies of water. There were plenty of farm ponds for swimming and fishing and a handful of privately-constructed recreation lakes. Cities along rivers sometimes created dams for boating lakes or created their lakes and reservoirs to provide reliable water supplies and for local recreation. By the late 1920s the State of Kansas became involved in some lake construction. In 1930 the newly-created Kansas Forestry, Fish, and Game Commission



oversaw the construction of a dam across Ladder Creek in Scott County to form what was initially called Lake McBride, today part of Lake Scott State Park.

Sometimes private companies created bodies of water as well, such as when the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe created a facility to water locomotives, a location that later became Santa Fe Lake. The 1939 Works Progress Administration guidebook to Kansas listed Santa Fe Lake as the only lake in the state large enough for sailing regattas, an indication of how limited boating was in the Sunflower State at the time. Rivers offered chances to fish, although angling in big bodies of water was still the realm of the intrepid outdoor enthusiast who trekked out to other parts of the country.

As the twentieth century unfolded, federal and state agencies began to create what officials called “impoundments.” Some were reservoirs, the Bureau of Reclamation’s projects intended to pool water for agriculture and other purposes. Others were lakes, the creation of the Army Corps of Engineers for the purpose of flood control and navigation.

During the Great Depression, the New Deal created programs that constructed lakes in Kansas as public

works programs and to address issues such as soil conservation. One was the Civilian Conservation Corps, which, for example, created Lake Fegan in Woodson County. Another was the Works Progress Administration, whose efforts included Lake Afton west of Wichita. Federal programs supported state efforts, including the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act that led to the development of Cheyenne Bottoms. Flood control was an important stimulus to lake and reservoir construction, including the Flood Control Act of 1938. The floods of 1944 resulted in the Flood Control Act of that year, resulting in the creation, for example, of Fall River Lake.

Then came the epic floods in the summer 1951 that inundated over one hundred communities and over 10,000 farms along the Kaw/Kansas and Missouri rivers. These floods jump-started an already developing trend for lake and reservoir construction. In particular, work took place under the Army Corps of Engineers’ Kansas City District (including Tuttle Creek, Milford, Perry, Clinton, Wilson, Kanopolis, Hillsdale, Pomona, and Melvern) and the Tulsa District (including Marion, John Redmond, Council Grove, Elk City, Pearson-Skubitz Big Hill, Fall



*Waterfall, Geary County Lake*  
Dave Leiker

River, Toronto, El Dorado, and – until it was folded into El Dorado – Douglass). Out west the Bureau of Reclamation was the main agency involved, establishing reservoirs including Cheney, Glen Elder, Cedar Bluff, Webster, Kirwin, Lovewell, and Keith Sebelius. The moves were controversial, especially for the towns and farms that found themselves to be eventually underwater. However, with an attitude of “the interests of the many

outweigh the interests of the few,” pressure to relieve flooding in cities such as Manhattan and Wichita proved decisive.

The floods prompted a similar interest in watershed management at the state level. The Kansas constitution initially banned the state from getting involved in “internal improvements,” suggesting that local bodies were the more appropriate venues for matters such as flood control. That changed in 1958 when Kansas

voters amended the constitution so that state officials could officially participate in flood control activities. A few years earlier, in 1955, Kansas created a State Park and Recreation Authority. The Sunflower State was one of the last to establish such a body. Together, these policies allowed the state to partner with Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation to establish a new roster of state parks that allowed Kansans access to something that would have been almost unknown just a generation earlier: shoreline.

By the time of the 1961 statehood centennial, park and recreation scholar Freeman Tilden noted Kansas had “fifty-seven areas [that] are designated as state parks, lakes, and recreation areas, all of them being man-made impoundments providing fishing and other water activities.” While modest compared to neighboring states, these recreation sites were noteworthy for a state that lacked massive national parks and forests and had one of the highest percentages of land in private ownership.

In these years after the Second World War, the nation’s growing middle class had income, free time, and access to transportation like never before. The

weekend had become an expected part of life for blue- and white-collar workers. Families who worked in the professions and the defense industry, and who may have benefitted from the G.I. Bill’s support, could purchase automobiles and head out into the countryside. They took to paved local roads, motored down highways such as Route 66, and, later, zipped from place to place on the newly-established Interstate system. From Sunday drives to family trips out west, getting away from it all became nearly a national obsession.

Kansas now had opportunities for water-based recreation. Scores of camps emerged, from church camps and scout camps to private enterprises. This was the world, for example, when Coleman transitioned from supplying rural families who lived beyond the electric grid into a camping and outdoor recreation icon.

Near the new lakes, new businesses developed. There were bait shops that supplied anglers, hunters, and campers. There were those who ran marinas and docks and stored boats. Some have become local landmarks, such as the quirky “Lizard Lips” Grill and Deli outside Toronto on Highway 54. Businesses in nearby towns found a new stream of customers, at least

in the summer months, who frequented everything from restaurants and grocery stores to motels. The newly-created riparian habitats supported game birds and animals, establishing a tradition of hunting that has been an important part of the local economy ever since. In addition, rural Kansas saw a new host of jobs for those who worked for the Army Corps of Engineers or the Bureau of Reclamation, and those who were state parks and wildlife officials.

There was something low key and informal to water-based recreation in this state. Kansas never cultivated the extensive communities of cottages that dominated the lakes in Michigan or Wisconsin. Kansas’ lakes did not support resorts like those found in Arkansas or Kentucky. None developed the tourist industry like the casino resorts in Oklahoma or like Missouri’s Table Rock Lake, where visitors from nearby Branson could take the Branson Belle showboat for an excursion. There was certainly nothing in Kansas to parallel incorporated urban centers such as Lake Havasu City in Arizona that offered year-round residents suburban living, shopping centers, schools, and other amenities. The Kansan approach to lakes was closer to that of

Nebraska: getaways for residents in the region rather than travel destinations. There was something very much “do it yourself” about this form of recreation. Although there were nearby cafes, meals were more apt to be cooked over the campfire, especially on long weekends when restaurants in town were closed on Sundays. It was about planning trips and making sure nothing was forgotten, lest a mistake require a long trek to the nearest town to a store that may or may not be open. Perhaps there is something about recreation in the Heartland that favors this “getting away from it all” while still having chores to do.

Kansans had a number of ways to appreciate their new waterfront opportunities. There were the day excursionists. There were those who brought tents, came in recreational vehicles, or rented cabins on or near the lakes. There were the overflow crowds on holiday weekends and those who visited their boats docked at the various marinas. Others created vacation cabins. Some were substantial structures along the lakeshore, but most communities of these temporary residents consisted of trailers, mobile homes, and amateur-built structures (and, in some cases, a combination thereof)





*Tuttle Creek Sign*  
Kansas State Historical Society

located within a short distance from the water's edge.

Looking around at these lakes today, one can see that they are very much loved, even if that love has shown up in the wear and tear on facilities. At the state parks themselves, scores of tidy cabins constructed over the past decade or so have held up well. The docks and boat ramps seem to be kept up. In other places, however, the shower and restroom facilities can seem a bit dated since their construction in the 1960s. There are the picnic tables with weathered boards

and interpretative signs that faded into unreadability years ago.

The towns, too, have shown their age. There are the motels that hold on to the dated cutesy country look that was popular when the lakes were new but has not quite caught up with the sleeker look that today's younger visitors prefer. Driving to the lakes, one goes past scores of abandoned gas stations and boarded up shops, relics of a time when cars needed more regular refueling. The vacation cottage communities are facing their own issues. They emerged at a time when workers had weekends to spend, when

forty-hour work weeks were the maximum rather than the minimum. Whether the children and grandchildren who inherit these properties are able to maintain them (or even want to) remains to be seen.

How the lakes of Kansas fare in the future will depend on many questions. Will there be public funding to maintain and improve facilities? If not, will there be enough demand in the private sector for an alternative funding "stream"? Even more uncertain are the trends in outdoor recreation. Younger generations love the outdoors as much as their World War II era grandparents and great-grandparents. However, Kansas' lakes were the products of an era when the driving distance for a long weekend marked the extent of many families' travel opportunities. Will future generations look forward to the vacation trailer their grandparents set up, or would they prefer to save up for a big blowout in an all-inclusive in the Caribbean?

Since that nature trail hike back a few years ago, I have found myself thinking as much about the future of Kansas' lakes as their past. They emerged when flood control and outdoor recreation seemed to fit together. They have become popular destinations on holiday weekends and the source of countless memories. Compared

to the regional tourist destinations found along the lakes in other states, Kansas' lakes continue to offer more informal, family-oriented down time. How these bodies of water, and the communities that have come to rely on them, fare in the decades to come remains to be seen. It is hard to predict what a nature hike will look like in fifty years; however, reflecting on it reveals insights that help us better assess trends and issues at work today.

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Jay M. Price directs the Local and Community History Program and Great Plains Studies Certificate Program at Wichita State University.